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ABSTRACT

Traditionally neglected in the classical humanities curriculum, Ovid is recommended as a writer worthy of inclusion in Latin programs at the sophomore and junior levels in high schools. As one possible strategy for survival of the classical humanities curriculum, the author argues that the writings of Ovid be included on the grounds that they are contemporary and relevant to current social issues. The author specifically feels that Ovid's "Metamorphoses" should be taught as an entire work and that the influence of Ovid upon other writers should be stressed in the continuing quest for relevance in the curriculum. (RL)

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THE PLACE OF OVID IN THE CLASSICAL HUMANITIES CURRICULUM

by

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I want to begin with a part of my own experience which crystallizes, I think, the different attitudes of student and teacher toward the study of Ovid. Latin was one of my languages for the Ph.D., tested by the classics department of the university, to which I repaired to make the appropriate arrangements. The choice of a prose author was mutual; I agreed immediately with a serious young professor upon Cicero. But when I suggested Ovid for the poetry portion of the examination, a grimace of disappointment, almost of distaste, crossed his face. "But he's too easy," he murmured. After sparring a bit, we settled upon Horace.

Horace is my own favorite classic poet, but Horace is an acquired taste, and a mature one. As Gilbert Highet remarks in Poets in a Landscape, Horace has been loathed by generations of adolescent schoolboys; he cites specifically Byron, Tennyson, Swinburne and Thackeray.[1] A taste for Ovid, on the other hand, is natural to the young - not because Ovid is easy, a rather cavalier dismissal for a poet so intelligent and so ambitious, but because he is fun. It was because I remembered my two semesters with Ovid as being most enjoyable that he was my choice to translate so many years later.

Coming as he does at the end of the Golden Age, Ovid suffers by comparison with other Roman poets, particularly in the eyes of the more sophisticated reader. Not only does he lack the difficult style (for all that it often hides the simple platitude) of Horace: he also seems

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simple next to the perplexities of Propertius, cynical beside the poignant despair of Catullus, trivial in comparison to the noble patriotism of Vergil. Highet calls Ovid "hedonistic, soft, sophisticated and cheerfully immoral," and immediately reminds us that this is not our judgment, but that of Ovid's own contemporaries and successors. Nevertheless, it is ultimately also Highet's judgment. He says of Ovid's talent that it was "ruined by shallowness and frivolity." Indeed, Ovid's place in the classical curriculum ought to be discussed if only to admit that frank and highly individualized sensuality still tends to shock people, not excepting those associated with the dignified discipline of classics. Not too long ago, the practice was to leave the most explicit poems untranslated, or to use an English euphemism for an obviously erotic idiom.

Yet Ovid uses no offensive words in his poems, and I question the aptness of the phrase "cheerfully immoral" to describe his attitude toward his society. Are we to trust the judgment of his emperor-pleasing fellow poets that he corrupted Roman society? Was the specific offense for which he seems to have been exiled, the disgrace of Julia minor, granddaughter to Augustus Caesar, the fault of Ovid's Ars Amatoria? Or did the example of Augustus himself, who seduced his third wife, Livia, while she was pregnant, and forced her immediately through marriage and divorce, have rather more to do with Julia's offense? Ovid's account that the scandal was something which he witnessed, but did not participate in, does not necessarily imply that either the Amores, or the parody on the Georgics which followed it, the Ars Amatoria, were responsible for the moral cesspool of the imperial family. Rather, the very fact that Ovid says he "saw" it, and that his practical handbook for seducers had something to do with the trouble, implies that Ovid's fault lay in being

too honest an observer of his society. Not for him Vergil's stern and moralizing look at the virtues of the Italian countryside when the great age of Roman agricultural life had already passed! Rather, Ovid chose to describe the life which he and other Roman noblemen actually lived, in the language they actually spoke. Octavian banished Ovid as much for the revolutionary as for the sensual qualities of his verses.

What do these qualities of Ovid's poetry - its good humor, its emphasis upon love, and its description of things as they are rather than as they should be - have to do with his place in the curriculum? I think they suggest that Ovid should be taught to the young, specifically in the high school, and perhaps as early as the second or third year of Latin. Ovid was my first year of college Latin - or rather we were permitted to translate selections from the Metamorphoses, in which (presumably) the extreme eroticism and repugnance of much of the subject matter is tempered by the hallowed air which surrounds those Greek myths which deal with seduction, incest and cannibalism. The fact that we worked from an anthology made up of bits and pieces - I remember particularly "Pyramus and Thisbe," though no one bothered to tell me that Ovid probably made that story up himself[2] - raises another traditional problem with the teaching of Ovid which ought to be resolved. Since we study the Odyssesy as a whole, and Cicero's orations against Catiline as a whole, why do we study Ovid in parts? Why not a year on the Metamorphoses? If Christopher Marlowe, working from a probably corrupt medieval copy, was able to translate the Amores into English - if Shakespeare, without much formal education, read both the Amores and the Metamorphoses in the original - why cannot today's generation, allegedly the best educated of all time, do the same?

That we do not let them suggest that we have given to Caesar's place in the curriculum - and perhaps even to Cicero's - a veneration they may no longer deserve. Caesar was never among the first rank of Roman writers, and the appropriateness of a book devoted entirely to the description of a cruel and imperialistic war at this point in our nation's history is highly questionable. Cicero is merely a bore to most of the young. I am very glad now that I had Cicero - for one thing, a training in Ciceronian periods is a great help to understanding Milton's style. But it is significant that it is the least popular of the three greatest English poets, Milton, who preferred the grand style. For the other two, Chaucer and Shakespeare, the great innovators of our language, Ovid was not only the favorite of all classical authors, but a vital source of lifelong inspiration.

It was Ovid, moreover, who was the chief classical inspiration during the revival of literature in the Second Feudal Age. That conception of romantic love anatomized by Stendahl in De l'amour and christened by Gaston Paris "courtly love" grew out of Ovid's passionate verses, as well as chivalry, feudalism, the Christian church, and other sources as diverse as Arabic poetry. It matters little for the present discussion whether courtly love eventually became, as D.W. Robertson has suggested, a sort of mock-genre, a courtly fabliau. To the medievals, Ovid was The Teacher of Love, his regular title among the poets who found fresh inspiration in the Amores and the Metamorphoses. They erected to him at his birthplace in Sulmona a statue - typically medievalized, like so much else from the eleventh to the fourteenth century - in which Ovid wears a doctor's gown and cap, and carries a book.

Dozens of books have grown out of Ovid's great theme, that only love can conquer death, from the twelfth century Béroul's Tristan to the

nineteenth century Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights. This theme and its importance in subsequent literature, drama and such other genres as film have been examined by Denis de Rougemont in Love in the Western World. One need not agree with his hypothesis that it is also connected with the Cathar heresy to understand the subversive effect of such love, spiritual as well as physical, upon society, through its attack upon marriage and the family, the basic unit of society. And this brings us back full circle to Ovid's banishment for having attacked the same social institutions. In The Classical Tradition, Gilbert Highet remarks that, even if romantic love sprang up as a medieval institution, "it was a great classical poet who gave it authority by his antiquity, illustrated it by his stories, and elaborated it by his advice."[3] Andreas Capellanus' 12th century treatise De arte honeste amandi is modeled upon the Ars Amatoria as much in its tongue-in-cheek tone as in its mock-intellectual discussion of lovemaking.

Nor did the eventual refinement and sublimation of physical love in the writing of Dante and Petrarch, Ronsard and Sidney, obviate the subversiveness of the concept of courtly love. Far more revolutionary than mere adultery was Ovid's corrolary assumption that the two lovers lived in a world by themselves, outside the bounds of society. Ovid was the first love poet to treat woman as an equal. Catullus, the other great Roman poet of passionate love, had no such relationship to his Clodia, who is always pictured as either far above or far below him. Indeed, it was the closed world of Ovid and Corinna, now become Tristan and Iseut on the ship from Ireland or in the Forest of Morrois, which helped to make possible the creation of the closed worlds of Dante and of the Shakespearean sonnets. These allied themes of love and alienation from society are so pertinent to the young that their relevance to today's classical

humanities curriculum should be obvious. For the young do not know that they are reliving the experiences of other people and other generations. And if we tell them so, as parents or as teachers, they look at us, in our seeming content with our own places in the establishment, and smile with a cynicism worthy of Ovid himself.

But if emotional relevance is one important reason for including Ovid early in the study of classics, educational relevance is another and even more important factor. As part of the humanities curriculum, classics ought to illuminate and harmonize with other parts of that curriculum. I have already noted that the revival of Ovidian studies was almost synonymous with the revival of learning in Europe. Let me turn now to individual authors, individual works and individual themes.

Since I teach Chaucer, I am delightedly aware of how much he loved Ovid. Gilbert Highet,who shows a fine understanding of Shakespeare, is rather hard on Chaucer through not grasping how much of his work is ironic in tone. For instance, he cites the Man of Law's slip in the Canterbury Tales:

> ...Muses that men clepe Pierides[4]-
> Metamorphosios woot what I mene;

as "Chaucer's ignorant allusion to Ovid's Metamorphoses, treated as if the poem were a man."[5] But the Man of Law, whom Geoffrey Chaucer the Pilgrim has already described as seeming busier than he was, is merely distinguishing between Pierides, the patronymic of the Muses, and Pierides, the patronymic of the daughters of the King of Emathia who were turned into magpies for contending with the Muses. The Man of Law's too busy learning seems to have momentarily confused the two. His reference to Ovid's Metamorphoses is a rhetorical figure, personification, appropriate to his pompous personality. Gilbert Highet thinks that this cannot be a joke, because Chaucer "seriously" quotes "one of Ovid's mistresses" in Anelida and Arcite:

"First folow I Stace, and after him Corinne-."[6] However, Chaucer is here merely using another trope of classical rhetoric, which we presently call figures of speech: either synechdoche, or the use of the part for the whole, or metonymy, the use of a thing for that which it suggests -- depending on the view one takes of Corinna. Corinna is part of Ovid's poetry, her name suggests Ovid, and the line is a graceful and acceptable way for Chaucer to complement his favorite classical poet. Further, the Man of Law compares Chaucer the poet directly with Ovid:

> That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
> On metres and on rymyng craftily,
> Hath seyd hem in swich Englissh as he kan
> Of olde tyme, and knoweth many a man;
> And if he have noght seyde hem, leve brother,
> In o book, he hath seyd hem in another,
> For he hath toold of loveris up and doun
> Mo than Ovide made of mencioun[7]

Part of the joke may be that Ovid himself was originally a man of law.

Further, Chaucer's tone in the Book of the Duchess - and in that masterwork on love and death, Troilus and Criseyde - resembles Ovid's in the Ars Amatoria: the detached, somewhat skeptical observer of the often strange ways of a man and a woman in love. That Chaucer could make use of this tone (and subtly modify it) is a mark of Ovid's adaptability.

But Ovid was not merely the favorite medieval author. His influence carried over well into the Renaissance. A few years ago I worked with a medieval Latin Ms. on which Christopher Marlowe may have based his version of the Amores. In spite of the wrong case endings and the medieval abbreviations, the tone of the poem was that of the original. And tone belongs to what Ezra Pound has described as the translatable part of poetry. An even more interesting Ovidian translation than Marlowe's is Arthur Golding's, called Shakespeare's Ovid by W.H.D. Rouse when he first edited it in 1904. This was reissued by the Centaur

Classics in 1961 and limited to 1500 copies. I have brought one of these copies with me. Among the interesting trivia in the short "Publishers' Foreword," one may find that, in October, 1957, when Sulmona began its celebration of the 2000th anniversary of the death of Ovid, The Times of London wrote, "he has influenced the content of European literature probably more than any other of the ancients."[8] Ezra Pound, perhaps overstating the case, said of Golding's translation of Ovid that no one "can know anything about the art of lucid narrative in English... without seeing the whole of the volume.... Though it is the most beautiful book in the language, I am not here citing it for decorative purposes but for the narrative quality."[9]

That narrative quality was, next to North's Plutarch's Lives and Holinshed's Chronicles, the most important influence upon Shakespeare's writing. Ovid is invoked, not only in Shakespeare's two earliest poems, but in almost all the plays; and a copy of the Metamorphoses is brought onto the stage and named by Shakespeare (TA, IV, 1, 42). J.A.K. Thomson notes in his book, Shakespeare and the Classics, that nine-tenths of Shakespeare's classical mythology comes from the Metamorphoses.[10] Moreover, L.P. Wilkinson, in Ovid Recalled, says that, "He draws on every book in the Metamorphoses and there is scarcely a play which shows no trace of its influence."[11] This influence was obvious even to Shakespeare's contemporaries. Francis Meres, in a much-quoted line, said in 1578 that "the sweete wittie soule of Ouid liues in mellifluous and hony-tongued Shakespeare." To leaf through Golding's Ovid - Shakespeare's Ovid - is to see how direct the influence of that soul, and of Golding's too, could be. As Highet remarks, the book is in "lumbering 'fourteeners;'" but even that limp, awkward, anddecidedly

unEnglish meter cannot disguise the imagery. When Juliet says that "at lover's perjuries, / They say, Jove laughs," she is quoting the Ars Amatoria. Highet has found a fascinating pairing in which Shakespeare echoes the very phrasing of Golding's translation (Prospero's incantation from The Tempest, V, 1, 33-50, against Golding's rendering of Met., VIII, 197ff.).[12] Moreover, Shakespeare must have known Ovid in the original, if only because he (and not Golding) uses the name Titania (MND), one of Ovid's titles for Diana-Aphrodite. Shakespeare's attitude toward the classic writers may be summed up in the speech of Tranio comparing Ovid with philosophy, and concluding that Ovid is infinitely more delightful (TS, I, i, 29ff.)

But Chaucer and Shakespeare are wholly relevant only to English literature, you will say. Students go into many other disciplines, hopefully some into classics itself. What general justification, then, for Ovid over Caesar, over Cicero? Let me address myself briefly to a few other aspects of humanities. French literature is no less influenced by Ovid than is English literature. Not only does the entire concept of courtly love, with strong Ovidian overtones, come out of twelfth century France - and we ought to remember here that Chrétien de Troyes translated the Ars Amatoria, even if his version is no longer extant - but Le Roman de la Rose, without which no macrocosmic conception of French literature would be possible, begins with a reference to Ovid:

> Ce est li Romanz de la Rose
> ou l' art d'amors est touste enclose (italics mine)

It contains, besides, approximately 600 lines (or over one-fourth of the total) drawn directly from the third book of the Ars Amatoria. From it stem the psychological drama of Corneille and Racine, Stendhal's De l'amour, and the careful examination of the varieties of human love which is the core of Proust. Highet says that the Roman contains "the entire meta-

physics of medieval love, as the Divine Comedy contains the metaphysics of medieval Christianity."[13] If we recall that Dante is also Ovidian in his classical inspiration, we can begin to see the significance of Ovid for the whole of European literature. And this is to say nothing of the delightful Ovid Moralisé, the medieval version of the Metamorphoses with Christian glosses.

I have time to discuss the significance for the humanities of only one major Ovidian theme. Even the Spaniards do not claim credit for inventing the Don Juan theme. It is true that the play of Tirso de Molina, written in 1630, El burlador de Sevilla, is the locus classicus in literature for the persistent folk legends based (perhaps) upon an actual Don Juan Tenorio. But the most sophisticated Spanish critic of the theme, Gregorio Marañon, says:

> Don Juan no es un prototípo español, ni menos andaluz. Es un producto de sociedades decadentes....En está se había publicado el primer manual, el más cínico y el más perfecto del amor donjuanesco, que es el Ars amandi, de Ovidio, El mismo Ovidio fué un Don Juan....[14]

Some two dozen plays in French alone have been produced in our century on variations on the Don Juan theme. But the Don Juan theme is not only significant for drama. It has also been a persistent musical theme; the most famous opera on the subject is Mozart's Don Giovanni, in which Leperello's aria on the "mil e trente" loves of Don Juan captures the true Ovidian cadence. One of the greatest of Shaw's plays, Man and Superman, is based upon the idea of the Don Juan - or, to name generically his female counterpart, whom Shaw caught so superbly, the Doña Juana. Don Juan is no less important philosophically. Kierkegaard distinguishes between the intellectual Don Juan, who takes pleasure in the anticipation and later contemplation

of the art of seduction rather than the act itself; and the musical Don Juan, the immediate or sensuous man who lives for the act alone. To Albert Camus, Don Juan is an example of the absurd man who finds surcease from his irrational world in sensual pleasure. Indeed, every Don Juan since Ovid himself has been a man of his age, caught up in a social system which professes a belief contrary to its practice, rebelling against it in the best way he can.

To say this is to reunite the two reasons for including Ovid early and as a larger part of the classical humanities curriculum. Here, the intellectual theme of man against his world unites with the emotional theme of man against his world. And here, the relevance of change, of changing moral values set against the supposed absolute standards of society, unite the themes of the Amores and Ars Amatoria with the theme of the Metamorphoses. Why should students have to listen only to Woodie Guthrie to know that "the times they are a-changing?" Why should they have to look in a footnote to find that Chaucer's Man of Law owes his learning (however "busie") to the Metamorphoses? Such knowledge should come, not by looking up a reference and dutifully noting page and line, but as a delightful shock of recognition. It is of such recognitions, of allied themes, of one author influencing another, of one culture growing out of another, that true learning is born. All of learning may not lie in the act of making connections; but I am convinced that the most important part of it lies in conclusions drawn from such intuitively recognized but carefully weighed correlations, between what has been said before and what is being said now which has grown out of what has been said before. In a fine essay on this subject, T.S. Eliot (who used Ovid's story of Philomela as an important leitmotif to his poem,

The Wasteland) called the artistic result of this interaction "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

I want to conclude this too short discussion of Ovid by recommending the following changes in the classical humanities curriculum. First, that Ovid be taught to the young, the sophomores or juniors in high school, because of the relevance of his themes of love, change and death to their lives. Why should we prohibit a poem on "Corinna's successful but dangerous abortion" in a state which has just passed a law legalizing abortion? Second, that Ovid be taught in wholes: I scarcely think I conceived of the Metamorphoses as a large, unified epic poem, because of the fragmentary way it was taught. Third, that the influence of Ovid upon other disciplines and other literatures be stressed, as part of the relevance we all hope will keep students studying classics. Fourth, that Ovid's place as "one of the three or four greatest Roman poets" (the phrase is Highet's)[15] be secured against the invective directed toward his frank sensuality since the Victorian Age: indeed, in some quarters since his own time. A generation exposed to Hair and Myra Breckenridge would not be shocked or contaminated by the Amores or the Ars Amatoria. Fifth, that the seeming effortlessness of his style (called grace in other authors) not be confused with "easiness." There is time to study the exquisite syntax of Horace in maturity, when he can be appreciated. Finally, that Ovid's contemporanëity (an awkward word, but I cannot think of a better) be stressed. Consider the following:

> There were grave moral conflicts, particularly in sexual matters: to some observers, it seemed as though what had started as a good movement for the emancipation of women from their chattel status was degenerating into an irresistible avalanche, destroying the very ideal of chastity, breaking up the structure of the family, and fatally altering the normal relation between the sexes. As women grew bolder and more independent...they grew more selfish, more cruel, vain, and irresponsible. Once they had been faithful to their husbands. Now they were disloyal even to their lovers. Divorce grew commonplace. The moral education of children was

neglected, or else utterly perverted.[16]

Is this Women's Liberation, 1970? No. It is Ovid's Rome, and the Rome that was for a hundred years before and after Ovid.

It is also, of course, our own day. Or one part of our own day, and perhaps a part that ought to be recognized and weighed against all other parts.

The young have a saying, "getting it all together," which is roughly their equivalent of the concept of the Renaissance man. I think Ovid is one way for teachers of Latin to get it all together. I think teaching Ovid to the young is one survival route the Classical Humanities Curriculum ought to investigate.

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NOTES

1. Gilbert Highet, Poets in a Landscape (New York: Knopf, 1957), p. 106.

2. G. Hart, Ursprung und Verbreitung der Pyramus--und Thisbe Saga (Passau, Germany, 1889-1891), traces the story back to Ovid but no further. Perhaps Ovid's remark that he got it from the East is a private joke.

3. Gilbert Highet, The Classical Tradition (New York: Oxford, 1949), p.59. Without this invaluable, learned, and immensely interesting book to guide my research, the difficulties of this paper would have proved all but insurmountable. I owe most of my clues in tracing Ovidian influences to Professor Highet.

4. The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 63, ll. 93-94. Subsequently noted as Chaucer.

5. Highet, Classical Tradition, p. 96.

6. Chaucer, p. 304, l. 21.

7. Chaucer, p. 62, ll. 47-54.

8. Shakespeare's Ovid, Being Arthur Golding's Translation of the Metamorphoses, ed, W.H.D. Rouse, 2nd. ed., Centaur Classics (London: Centaur, 1961), "Foreward," n. p.

9. Ezra Pound, The ABC of Reading (New York: New Directions, n.d.), p.126.

10. J.A.K. Thompson, Shakespeare and the Classics (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), p. 42.

11. L.P. Wilkinson, Ovid Recalled (London: Cambridge, 1955), p. 410.

12. Highet, Classical Tradition, p. 206.

13. Gregorio Marañon, Don Juan, 9th ed. (Madrid, 1960), p. 94.

14. Highet, Classical Tradition, p. 59.

15. Highet, Poets, pp. 184-185.